

Is a happier society possible?

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H.L. Mencken defined Puritanism as ‘the haunting fear that someone, somewhere may be happy’. I hope there are no Puritans here, because I have always believed that the best society is the one in which there is the most happiness and, above all, the least misery. It’s a very simple idea that was widely accepted in the 18th-century Enlightenment and in the decades that followed. Unfortunately it’s been much less accepted in the 21st century. That has done us no good and it is not perhaps surprising that measured happiness in Britain and the U.S. is no higher now than it was in the 1950s.

If we do want a happier society, the first thing we have to do is to reassert the Enlightenment ideal – to agree that happiness is the objective for our society. But that has to translate into individual behaviour, which means that everybody has to make that their personal objective in life. In other words if we ask the question “how should we live?” the answer is: we should each aim to produce the most happiness we can in the world around us, and the least misery.

That is the pledge that members of the new movement called ‘Action for Happiness’ will make – that they will aim to create more happiness in the world around them and less misery. But then of course there is the question of how we do that, in our own lives and through the kinds of policies and institutions that we advocate.

Causes

That depends on what determines happiness. In my view the central aim of social science should be to determine the conditions that produce happiness and how these conditions can be generated. But we do already know a good deal, as a result of the huge burgeoning of ‘happiness studies’ in the last 30 years. So let me review some of what we know and what follows from it. I want to talk about:

- income;
- human relationships;
- altruism;
- work; and
- our movement.

Income

I will begin with income, because I suppose the dominant idea in post-war culture has been that if we could all become richer, that would be the best measure of progress. And it is certainly true that in every single society that has ever been studied, richer people are happier than poorer people. It is also always found that extra income does more for a poor person than for a rich person, and the impact of extra income is roughly inversely proportional to the income the person already has. So if you focus on income you would want to increase average income and to reduce the inequality. That would just about sum it up.

But the shocking finding is that over time in rich societies like ours, the huge increase in average income since the 1950s has not been accompanied with any increase in average happiness¹ – not even in the golden age up to the 1970s when inequality was actually falling.

We know the reason for this: what people in rich countries care about is not their absolute income but their income relative to other people. Although some economists deny this, their results depend heavily on evidence from poor and middle-income countries.² In more advanced countries, we have abundant evidence that relative income is what people care about. And it is of course impossible to raise the average level of relative income. If one person goes up, someone else has to go down. It is a zero-sum game. So, at the level of society, raising average income is a fruitless goal. It will happen anyway but we should not sacrifice to that goal other things that really could produce a happier society.

Relationships

Those things are all to do with the quality of our human relationships – in the community, in the family, and at work. In our external world the most important single factor affecting our happiness is whether we feel other people are on our side. Not a bad measure of this is a question that has been asked in many countries over many years: Do you think other people can be trusted? Only 30 per cent of people in the U.K. and U.S. think they can, compared with 60 per cent some 40 years ago.³ But in Scandinavia the level is still over 60 per cent, and these are the happiest countries too.

We are suffering from a philosophy of excessive individualism, in which many people are encouraged to believe that their proper goal in life is to do the best they can for themselves rather than contribute to the lives of others. Some years ago, two dreadful placards went up in the Department for Education, eight storeys high, with the words 'Getting ahead'. This is quite the wrong message to send to our children.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation did a wonderful report a few years ago on our main social ills and identified excessive individualism as one of the worst.⁴ Quite right. In our Good Childhood Enquiry we reached the same conclusion.⁵ And it has got a lot worse. In the 1960s, two-thirds of U.S. students said it was very important to develop a meaningful philosophy of life and only 45 per cent said it was important to be well-off. Now the numbers are the other way round.

But none of this is inevitable because, as I have said, some societies are much more trusting than others. As Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett have shown, the trusting societies are also more equal, and our societies in Britain and the U.S. have become less equal.⁶ I do not think that more inequality is causing lower trust or vice versa. I think that both are reflecting the growth of individualism.

Altruism

But can we reverse this? The first point is that social trends can be reversed. Britain in the 18th century was increasingly anarchic and licentious but this trend was sharply reversed in the early 19th century, which ushered in an era of much more social responsibility.

We also know that there are important elements in our nature which we can build on to produce a more altruistic society. Clearly we have a dual nature. On the one side is the strongly egotistic nature based on the struggle for survival and to be the alpha male or female. On the other side there is the biological basis of altruism.

Here are two interesting experiments. The first is about empathy.⁷ Two friends (A and B) are put in a laboratory and Person A's brain is wired up. First he is given an electric shock on his hand and then his friend is given the same shock. In each case, person A's brain is activated in the same brain area. Fellow-feeling is a real feeling based on identification with the friend.

The second experiment is about good and bad behaviour.⁸ People play a game which tests if they are trustworthy by whether they share their money with another person. When a person behaves well, his brain is activated in exactly the same place as when he receives some other reward like chocolate.

This is a crucial experiment for the theory of morals. For it shows that virtue can be its own reward. As they say, if you want to feel good, do good. That of course was the basis of Aristotle's theory of good behaviour – that good behaviour has to be learned as a habit and then the virtuous person will experience pleasure when he behaves virtuously (not always of course, but generally so). In my view that should be the foundation of moral education rather than the dreadful Kantian doctrine that you cannot do your duty from habit. The revival of altruism in the 21st century cannot be based on the hair shirt, but it can be based on a warm-hearted understanding of human psychology.

This includes the truism that you are unlikely to feel compassion for others unless you also have compassion for yourself. We have plenty of experimental evidence that both of these can be taught.⁹

This is not the time for my lecture on mental health. But I strongly believe that we have got to teach compassion in school – to yourself and to others. And that we have to give much more priority to mental health services for children and adults in the NHS.

Work

However, I do want to say something about work which is actually my professional subject of study. Obviously it is important to have work if you want it. But the quality of work is also crucial. One of the most depressing things I know is this: that when people make a diary of the previous day, recording how happy they were in each episode, they were least happy when spending time with their boss. What a dreadful situation.

We know from psychology that the three main factors which make for satisfying work are:

- Mastery. Doing work which is challenging but which you can manage successfully.
- Control. Having enough discretion in how you do the job.
- Purpose. The feeling that what you do is worthwhile and part of some wider whole.¹⁰

Yet so many forms of management cut right across that basic desire for meaning and purpose in your work. Much of this is the fault of fellow economists employed in U.S. business schools. They have argued in favour of the closest possible relationship between pay and performance. For very routine and individual tasks this can work, but for tasks involving creativity and teamwork, it is very doubtful if it works and it certainly does not generate job satisfaction.

There are many experiments where two groups were asked to undertake interesting tasks and the group which was paid for successful performance did worse. One of these experiments may particularly interest this very idealistic audience.¹¹ People coming to enquire at a blood collection centre were divided into two groups, one of which was told they would be paid. Only 30 per cent of that group decided to give blood, compared with 50 per cent of those who were not paid. Of course, if it is a job, you need to be paid a reasonable amount, and you need to be promoted on merit. But you do not need to be paid precisely for what you do.

Let me tell you about Zappos, the largest online shoe shop, founded by Tony Hsieh. The main aim of the company is the happiness of its customers and its workers. There is no performance related pay, and no targets. But it does have 10 principles – a code of honour. And people are only recruited if they subscribe to them. After their probationary period, those who are successful are offered a \$2,000 bonus to quit. Hardly anyone takes it up. The business has been so successful it has been bought by Amazon for over \$1 billion.

So the time is ready for radical cultural change, away from a culture of selfishness and materialism, which fails to satisfy, towards one where we care more for each other's happiness – and make that the guiding *raison d'être* for our lives. That is why we are launching Action for Happiness. How will it work?

Action for Happiness

We want it to be a mass movement of people pursuing a better way of life. Many people have the right ideas already, but can get strength from joining with others. Its greatest strength will be through groups forming to improve their lives and the lives of others. But there will also be thousands of individuals who act on their own.

When you go into the website (www.actionforhappiness.org), you will find ten keys to happier living, and linked to each one is 50 actions you can take on your own or together with others to produce more happiness. For each action you will find scientific evidence and useful materials. One central feature – and the number one action – is taking the pledge to make the happiness of others a core purpose in our lives.

The movement is launching on 12 April 2011, but without trying we already have a membership of 4,000 people from 60 countries. That shows the hunger that people have for a better way of living. They feel that a better way of life must be possible. And the scientific evidence shows they are right.

Endnotes

- 1 Layard, R., Mayraz, G. and Nickell, S. (2010), 'Does Relative Income Matter? Are the Critics Right?' in E. Diener, J. Helliwell and D. Kahneman (eds) *International Differences in Well-Being*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- 2 As above.
- 3 Layard, R. (2010) *Happiness: Lessons from a new science*. London: Penguin (second edition), p.80.
- 4 Thake, S. (2008) *Individualism and consumerism: reframing the debate*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- 5 Layard, R. and Dunn, J. (2009) *A Good Childhood: Searching for Values in a Competitive Age*. London: Penguin.
- 6 Wilkinson, R. and Pickett, K. (2009) *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*. London: Allen Lane.
- 7 Singer, T. *et al.* (2004) 'Empathy for Pain Involves the Affective but not Sensory Components of Pain', *Science*, Vol. 303, pp. 1157–62.
- 8 Rilling, J.K. *et al.* (2002) 'A Neural Basis for Social Cooperation', *Neuron*, Vol. 35, pp. 395–405.
- 9 Gilbert, P. (2009) *The compassionate mind*. London: Constable & Robinson Ltd.
- 10 Pink, D. (2009) *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*. Riverhead.
- 11 As above.